measures wherever necassary. However, in a number of cases the exporters were found to have made unjustified claims for enhancement of DEPB rates allowed to their products and have brought pressure on the Government by alleging that incorrect/non-transparent DEPB rates were fixed. Such unjustified demands have not been acceded to by the Government.

(d) Various Export Promotion Schemes like Duty Exemption Scheme, EPCG Scheme, EOU/EPZ- Scheme, Gem & Jewellery Scheme are available during the current fiscal year.

Increase in Trade Deficit

640. SHRI PREM CHAND GUPTA: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether it is a fact that the trade deficit has widened from 3.4 billion dollar in the first eight months of 1997 to 6.7 billion dollar for the same period in 1998;

(b) if so, what are the reasons for this; and

(c) what are Government plans to contain it?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE): (a) As per the provisional data of the Directorate General of Commercial Intelligence & Statistics, the trade deficit during April-November, 1998-99 was US $6701 million as against a trade deficit of US $3369 million during the same period last year.

(b) and (c) The widening of trade deficit has been due both to a slow down in export growth and to increase in imports over exports. Export promotion measures are continuously being taken by the Government through changes in policies and procedures for providing an export friendly environment, involvement of States in export promotion and consultation with trade and industry. A number of steps have been taken to promote exports which include lowering of interest rates on export credit, reduction in transaction cost through decentralisation and simplification of procedures and various other measures as enumberated in the Exim Policy. Steps have also been taken to promote exports through multilateral and bilateral initiatives, identification of thrust sectors and focus regions. The Government is also initiating action through several measures to facilitiate investment in sectors with strong export potential, encourage diversification of India's export basket, address infrastructure shortcoming, improve export-facilitation measures and thus enhance the overall competitiveness of Indian exports. The Government is according high priority to exports and all necessary. steps are being taken to put exports on high growth trajectory.

Export of Rice

641. SHRI K.M. SAIFULLAH: Will the Minister of COMMERCE be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Food Ministry has sought quantitative restrictions on export of rice;

(b) if so, the reasons therefor; and

(c) the action taken to ensure buffer norms before export of rice?

THE MINISTER OF COMMERCE (SHRI RAMAKRISHNA HEGDE); (a) and (b) Review of Export Import Policy of agricultural products, including rice, is an on-going process and accordingly policy interventions are made as and when considered necessary keeping the interests of domestic producers, consumers and industry in view. Consultations in this regard between various Ministries including Ministry of Food & Consumer Affairs and exporters/importers are held from time to time. As per the current EXIM Policy, of rice (both basmati and non-basmati) is free, subject to registration of contracts with Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA)